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The Foreign Language of Choice

by George Lakoff

The emphasis on framing and language is not a covert attempt to push women's issues that are controversial -- be it abortion or contraception -- off the progressive agenda. Quite to the contrary, it is a refusal to accept the conservative definition of the issues involved, and put forward a positive vision, based on deeply progressive values and moral perspective.

Many of the feminist organizations have come to the conclusion that the word "choice," and the concept of choice, is a bad idea. Deborah Tannen, who is one of the best-known linguists in the country, observed over a decade ago that the word "choice" is taken from a consumer vocabulary -- as compared to the word "life," which is taken from a moral vocabulary.

Morality beats consumerism every time.

Moreover, the word "choice" versus "decision" is a bad idea because "choice" is less serious a word than "decision." From a linguistic perspective, "choice" was in itself a bad choice.

The word "abortion" is also negative -- the word "abort" as in "abort the mission," as if something has gone terribly wrong. Now you can't just immediately change a word like that to something that's more positive, and in fact, abortions are not situations where things have gone right. The situation is an unwanted pregnancy, un-wanted, negative.

If you use the word "abortion" at all these days, what you're doing is playing on the right's turf, where they have defined the issues to suit their interests, using their words.

What is necessary is a redefinition -- what I will call a "rearsing" -- of the issue. There are four different types of rearsing that are required, and each expresses a powerfully moral idea grounded in a progressive moral perspective.

Let's begin with the two ideas that Howard Dean [talked about](#) in his interview with Tim

Russert. First, Dean reparsed the issue in terms of personal freedom. He brought up the case of Terry Schiavo, where many Americans felt that this right-wing administration was interfering in the personal freedom of the families involved. They did not want government interference in this most important decision in people's lives. This idea is crucial to American democracy and it was at stake in the Schiavo case -- and most people recognized it as such. Dean was saying, and rightly so, that this is one of the ways we should talk about cases of unwanted pregnancies. These are medical decisions where the government should not be making decisions for any individual or family.

The second reparsing that Dean did in that interview was to take up the question of unwanted pregnancies itself. No one wants unwanted pregnancies, and there's no reason why we should have them since we have the means to prevent these pregnancies. A very high percentage of the unwanted pregnancies are among women and girls who have been denied sex education and contraception. And yet the right-wing has been denying sex education to students, and in many cases, even denying contraception through its abstinence-only programs. Now we also face "vigilante pharmacists" who are not just imposing their own will on these women and depriving them of their personal freedom, but also their access to much-needed contraception.

In other words, the right-wing is actually *creating* unwanted pregnancies.

I would take this analysis further and argue that we should not allow the right-wing to take ownership of the value of life -- that is our value. And the first place we have to start talking about the value of life is on the issue of infant mortality. The United States has the highest rate of infant mortality in the industrialized world, and there's no excuse for it. We have the medical care to prevent these deaths. The reason we continue to experience such high rates of infant mortality is that poor women are being denied prenatal and postnatal care, adequate health insurance, adequate food for their children -- and all this because of the attitude and policies of the conservatives.

Conservatives have been killing babies -- real babies have been born and who people want and love. They have been responsible for the death of children in this country at an astounding rate -- and we should discuss this situation openly.

In addition, by denying access to contraception -- by stopping the distribution of condoms, for example -- the right-wing is exposing people to AIDS, and therefore, again, supporting death. Furthermore, by refusing to implement policies that would lower the incidence of toxins in our environment, conservatives are actually threatening the health of newborn babies. There are about a hundred toxins, including mercury, in mothers' breast milk, which means that there are a hundred toxins in newborn babies -- all thanks to right-wing anti-environmental policies.

In short, the right-wing is imposing a culture of death on this country and we shouldn't stand for it. Progressive values and politics are committed to preserving and nurturing life.

Finally, I'm not sure of the exact numbers, but approximately 28,000 women in this country each year become pregnant as the result of a rape. That's a huge number and it occurs all over America. Here is the question that we must raise: should the federal government force a woman to bear the child of her rapist?

By denying a rape victim access to family planning, to contraception, and to medical operations to end a pregnancy, the conservatives are, in effect, in favor of forcing rape victims to bear the children of their rapist. In Colorado, for example, the governor recently vetoed a bill that would have permitted rape crisis centers to inform rape victims of the effectiveness of the morning-after pill. Now this kind of counseling is the very minimum that a rape crisis center ought to be doing for rape victims. This is an outrage. This is an outrage against victims of rape who ought to be protected, not further exploited.

So rather than trying to respond to some discussion about "abortion," we should actively, positively, put forward these four ideas -- personal freedom, zero tolerance for unwanted pregnancies, taking back life as a value, and protecting rape victims in this country from being forced to bear the children of their rapists.

Martha Burk is right in saying that the Democrats have been too afraid to address women's issues directly. But the failure is deeper and more extensive. Democrats have been slavishly adhering to polls that have been shaped by Republican framing, Republican language. As a

result, they have not been raising the most important issues in our society, be it with regard to women, the environment, or peace.